

## Relax in a Hurry

**Tension can build during your busy day, but believe it or not, you do have time to relieve that stress.**

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The phones, the caffeine, the boss, dinging faxes, deadlines, doubling up for laid-off colleagues, fear of being laid-off yourself -- eek, pretty soon your body is a clenched fist and you haven't stood up from the desk in hours!

You need to relax. But who can remember to -- and who has time? You do! It only takes five minutes.

### A Quick Mental Fix

If you are constantly stressed, according to Nick Hall, PhD, director of the Wellness Center at the Saddlebrook Resort in Wesley Chapel, Fla., you need to do as many things as possible to address both the effects and the causes.

Herbert Benson, MD, an associate professor at Harvard Medical School and president of the Mind-Body Medical Institute in Boston, says the opposite of the stress response is the relaxation response. He suggests a quick mantra meditation when you feel yourself breathing shallowly and tensing up.

"There are two things to remember about this," he says. "First, repetition is the key, and second, when you feel other thoughts coming -- and they will -- you must let them pass by and not address them."

Here's what you do: At your desk, close your eyes, consciously relax your muscles, breathe in slowly and on the exhalation, say a meaningful word. For some, Benson says, this word may be "Love." For a Catholic, it could be "Hail Mary, filled with grace." For a Jew, "Shalom." For a Buddhist or Hindu, "Ohm." It's up to you.

Breathe in, say the word silently while breathing out. When thoughts come, let them drift past. Do this for three or four minutes, open your eyes, and get back to work. Benson recommends doing this each morning before breakfast, too, for more than 10 minutes, but less than 20 minutes. This will set the practice in your mind, so when you need it at work, it will produce relief almost immediately.

### Exercise Remedies

Hall has another way of causing the body to unclench itself. And that's by making it even more stressed! Run up a flight of stairs, he says. Put demands on your body -- this will trigger the same pathways in the brain and nervous system as stress does and fool the body into thinking it needs to go into recovery. Hall even suggests dropping down in your cubicle and ripping off 10 pushups.

The Johns Hopkins cardiology department also recommends full-body relaxation by muscle group. Tense your facial muscles for five seconds, then relax. Then neck and shoulders. Work your way down. Shaking your arms and legs like a wet dog is also recommended.

## Breathing Techniques

If you're angry about a deadline or some remark someone made, your breathing is probably swift and shallow. The key is to reach down to the bottom of your lungs and drag out all the stale air. Do this by pushing out your stomach, rather than chest, when you inhale. Then squeeze all the air out, out, out, until you almost gasp. Then in again, abdomen out. Try it!

Deep breathing with some eye exercises (up, down, right left) also provides relief.

"You really can control so-called automatic functions, such as getting your heart rate down," Hall says. Jane D., a woman with a heart arrhythmia on a monitor in the ER, once amazed her fearful teenage daughter by telling her heart to "slow down, slow down" -- and it did, as measured right on the screen. People have more control over these functions than they imagine, Hall says.

Some people even swear by a quick session of alternate nostril breathing, a yoga technique. Close your mouth. Block off the right side of your nose with your finger. Inhale for a count of four. Hold for a count of 16, then, exhale through the other nostril for a count of eight. Then inhale through that nostril and repeat. Do about 10 repetitions. Of course, the boss might see you and think you are holding your nose in response to a new assignment!

## Changing the Situation

Just physically releasing tension is not enough, Hall cautions. It's better to get to the root cause of the tension, he says. "We tend to experience an emotion -- fear, anger -- and treat that emotion as if it's the problem," he says.

Instead, Hall recommends challenging the emotion and asking it three questions:

- Is this reaction justified?
- Is what I am doing now -- fuming, throwing things, putting a fist through the wall -- serving a useful function?
- Is this making me feel good?

This approach, Hall says, defuses the emotion and changes it.

Another technique is to stop in the stressful moment and finish the sentence: "I am glad I am not \_\_\_\_\_. " If you're in a traffic jam, you may be glad you are not in the accident up ahead. If you are loaded with another job, you can be glad you're not unemployed.

Other ways to change the situation might be to discuss delegating with your boss, taking vacations you're entitled to, or putting reasonable limits on your work hours. Turn down your telephone volume switch. Block out movement or distractions in your peripheral vision.

Or just smile -- whether you want to or not, darn it. "You can fool your body pretty well," Hall says. "The brain interprets the muscle movements of a smile into a feeling of happiness."

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